

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Ian Reid, *The End of Longing* (UWA Publishing, 2011)

Not knowing what had really happened: that was the worst of it ... There was the frustrating difficulty of having to depend on fragmentary information ... a medley of sources ... incomplete and sometimes inconsistent ... Being so distant from the many places she had travelled ... that lack of certainty about what to believe ... How well did they know their own sister? (5)

So begins a journey to discover what is known and what can be discovered about William Hammond, the man their sister Frances Phillips married. The Phillips brothers hope that they can not only solve the puzzle of the circumstances of their sister's death, but also discover whether or not she had enjoyed her life with Hammond.

Author Ian Reid has read extensively in order to provide an authority for the period as well as the imagined experiences and events of this book. He admits to 'taking liberties' with the fragmented collection of letters, reports and news clippings held by various members of his family relating to the real Frances Phillips and William Hammond, whose names he has borrowed for his two main characters. The real couple apparently travelled together in the areas included in the novel.

The content of *The End of Longing* is, however, entirely a work of historical fiction and has been skilfully realised. Elements of the various events recall those novels where the hero or heroine is beset by tragic circumstances that issue a challenge that may affect their characters for good or evil as they seek to find their way in life.

William Hammond, who becomes the focus of the Phillips brothers' enquiries the 'alleged' villain of the piece (8). 'He is described ... as a Baptist minister, bigamist, embezzler, thief and general all-round rascal' (8). Hammond's early life is beset by tragedy, and although there were a series of minders and mentors in his early life, there was only one steady role model who could inspire the intelligent youth: his poetry-quoting teacher, created in the young William a love of words, and a recognition that there is power in language.

William Hammond is a charmer who uses his charismatic presence and powerful oratory skills as an itinerant preacher to gain the trust of the various communities to which he travels. His love of reading very early brought to his notice 'Dr Coffin's *Botanic Guide to Health*' from which he gained a smattering of knowledge about the use of herbal remedies (55). As Reverend Hammond or Dr Hammond, depending on which persona he uses, he thereby gained legitimacy, sufficient to practise his charm on some vulnerable woman of means, enticing her into marriage, offering to invest her funds, then either moving on following her death or sometimes merely leaving abruptly; always without leaving a trace.

Frances Phillips is portrayed as a gentle, intelligent and artistic woman with a vivid imagination. When a hint of 'questionable death' from Toxaemia arises in conversation, 'The idea of a poisoned bloodstream troubled her imagination. That the fluid of life itself could become deadly ... Would the veins themselves feel fiery, or icy?' (74) Frances's love of poetry emerges as she ponders the line 'blood that freezes, blood that burns' (74).

Book reviews: *The End of Longing* by Ian Reid. Kay Hart.

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A friendship with a fellow art student is liberating for Frances, more used to her brother's criticism for her 'decided opinions' and 'headstrong ways'. Frances blossoms in Isabella's company, as 'both women keenly followed newspaper accounts of current political debates, were not loath to discuss what the government ought to be doing' (72).

How well does any one person know the 'truth' of another? Even the best among us may still mask their innermost being. This question underpins much of this novel and keeps the reader turning the pages in hope of finding answers. Is Hammond really such a despicable rogue? How could Frances whose background is in a very upright 'tabernacle' Christian family (10) succumb to him no matter how charming? Is it only loneliness that sets up her vulnerability to Hammond?

She drifted from one room to another ... staring at every object in turn ... She would pause in front of mirrors not to preen but simply to soften the sense of vacancy and funereal stillness that pervaded the house. At the thought that she would soon turn thirty ... the prospect of empty years among echoes felt unbearable. (64)

Or is it time away from her family that has also fed her hunger for new experiences?

Structured in parts, the novel covers the period 1852 to 1897, although not in chronological sequence. It is divided into the places in which William Hammond travelled alone or with Frances Phillips as his wife. In this style information is presented sometimes in the present and at others in flashback. It is a good device that keeps the narrative moving forward. The gradual revelation of clues, as with any good detective novel, allows the reader to become the detective in pursuit of truth.

There are many evocative passages, such as 'She walked on and on, this way and that, to avoid a life of waiting' (125); ... 'There are, I believe, different kinds of "home thoughts" ... different – different points of attachment for one's sense of longing. Or belonging' (75), and word choices enhance the period charm of the novel.

An historical novel such as this arouses the reader's interest in events of the past, and the inclusion of an extensive reading list in the Afterword will be useful to those wishing to pursue the subject.

Kay Hart